

Chicago Tribune Letter to the Editor, June 17, 2008

Recently, the House voted for taxpayers to pay for up to nine months of unemployment benefits to a person if they held a job for only two weeks.

Sounds crazy, doesn't it? But it's actually what would happen under legislation that just passed the House.

In the 1990s, President Clinton worked with Congress to pass bipartisan welfare reform, landmark legislation that helped our economy by encouraging work - and more importantly dignity for thousands of Americans. Welfare reform is widely seen as one of the great legislative achievements. Instead of addressing the need for bipartisan legislation to lower gas prices, the House is attempting to reverse President Clinton's legacy by rebuilding a taxpayer-funded culture of dependency in America.

This is an example of why we need reform in Washington.

Instead of targeting relief for those hit hardest, the House approved a \$14 billion spending bill to give nine months of unemployment benefits to people who held a job for as little as two weeks.

I support giving unemployment benefits to people who lost their jobs. In Illinois, you have a right to six months of benefits. In tough economic times, the federal government should offer three additional months. To get these extended benefits, both Presidents Clinton and Bush required that a person actually have their job for five months before qualifying for extended benefits.

It makes sense: to get extended unemployment benefits, you must have at least worked for a couple of months.

But under the House bill, beneficiaries would be paid by taxpayers for more than nine months even if they only worked two weeks. This would be the first time in more than 25 years that taxpayers would pay for people who did not work at least five months before unemployment - in effect, turning our common-sense unemployment system into something that could be abused. In fact, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office warned that "the availability of [such] benefits may discourage recipients from searching for work..."

I voted for a plan that would extend unemployment benefits for an additional 13 weeks - while keeping the requirement that to qualify, you needed a job for five months. My plan costs taxpayers \$7 billion. The House rejected this lower-cost option and voted to give full benefits after only two weeks of work. Such a bill costs taxpayers twice as much.

We know the best way to help a family is to find work. The greatest threat to our economy is the high price of gas. That is why I think Congress should bring a bipartisan, long-term energy bill to the floor to get us off foreign oil. We should help Americans in need. While I support extending unemployment benefits, extended benefits should be offered to people who held a job at least a couple of months.